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CHILD LABOR IN THE UNITED STATES AND ITS GREAT ATTENDANT EVILS

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“ ‘How long,’ they say, ‘how long, Oh, cruel Nation, will you stand to move the world on a child’s heart;
Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation, and tread onward to your throne amid the mart?’ ”

There are many centenaries that have received attention of late; there is one that has been almost ignored, and yet it well deserved to be remembered. Two years ago a hundred years had elapsed since the first act was passed by the British Parliament to abate the evils of child labor. England industrially is the most advanced country in the world, and English economic history shows the good and evil sides of industrial civilization writ large. A momentary glance at the conditions which called forth the Factory Act of 1802 and the legislation that followed will serve as a useful introduction to our subject. Briefly, the facts were these:

The pauper children of London workhouses were being fed to the machine, almost as the children in the ancient idolatry were fed to Moloch. Pauper children whom nobody owned, deserted waifs, orphans left on the parish—a burden on the rate payers—were sent by hundreds and thousands to supply the demand for cheap labor on the part of the factories, which at this time were everywhere springing up. These puny laborers—many of them not over seven years of age—were worked to death. But that hardly mattered, because the workhouse supply was sufficient to fill up the depleted ranks. The workhouses at first even paid a small premium to the manufacturers for taking their wards off their hands. The children were lodged in rough barracks, were cruelly driven.

by their taskmasters while at work, their food was of the worst description, they were forced to labor often fourteen hours, and they were decimated by disease. It was this state of things that provoked the law of 1802, but this law was the barest beginning. The law applied only to pauper children, and it was soon found necessary to protect children also against the pitiless egotism or the desperation of their own parents. The law applied only to certain industries, and it was found necessary to extend it to others. With the substitution of steam for water power, manufactories were transferred to cities, and the demand for cheap labor grew apace. It was felt that an age limit of some kind—below which children might not be employed—must be set. The efforts to do so were strangely hesitant and inadequate, but at least the principle of an age limit came to be recognized. In 1833 it was estimated that 56,000 children between nine and thirteen were employed in factories, a whole army of child workers; but nine was a high limit compared with what in many branches had been customary. Before the Children's Employment Committee a man named Apsden testified. Pointing to his boy, he said: "This boy when he was seven years old, in winter I carried on my shoulders across the snow to his place of work, and he would work for sixteen hours." What a picture; the man rousing a child of seven from his sleep, forcing him out of bed in the dark winter morning, trudging with him on his back across the snow, and depositing the little fellow, seven years old, to work for sixteen hours. And then another picture, for he adds: "I have often knelt at his side and given him food while he was working, because he was not allowed to leave the machine." If you wish to realize what child labor means, think of the inmates of London workhouses systematically done to death in the Yorkshire factories. Think of Apsden and his seven-year-old boy, and then think—if you can bear to do so—of another picture! For till now only the factories and not the mines had been touched. In the year 1842 evidence was taken as to the state of things in the coal mines. Children began their work in the mines sometimes as early as at five years of age. Little girls were found to make ten or twelve trips a day up steep ladders to the surface, carrying heavy loads of coal in wooden buckets on their shoulders. For the development of little girls into womanhood, what an admirable device! Women and girls, half nude, worked side by side with boys and men wholly so; every considera-

tion of human decency was flung to the winds. And in Mr. Cheyney's book on "The Industrial History of England," which usefully summarizes these facts, you will find a picture representing a woman crawling on all fours, dragging through a passageway about two feet high a car containing three or four hundredweight of coal by a chain attached to a girdle around her waist. And this is described as a common form of labor. This is the third picture which I would ask you to bear in mind. Progress has been made since then; the regulation of the labor of women and children—with the latter alone we are concerned now—has been more and more extended, though the task is not yet completed. The problem of production in the sweating trades has not yet been solved, and there are still other problems to be met.

And now I wish to pause a moment to ask a question, for it is not my purpose at this time to dwell on the horrors that prevailed in the past, and as you will presently learn prevail amongst us to-day to no inconsiderable extent, any more than I can help for the purposes of the argument and the plea which I want to submit to you. But I do want to ask a question which constantly obtrudes itself on my mind: How is it that members of the human species can behave with such cruelty as did the mine owners who employed women to drag coal cars, creeping on hands and knees with a chain attached around their waist, and how is it that manufacturers can be so merciless—I suppose many of them had children of their own, and must have known what a tender thing a child of seven years is—as to drive the little Apsden boy and his fellows for sixteen mortal hours in the mill; or so lost to all respect for human life as those employers who fed the workhouse children to their machines? I take no comfort in denouncing such men, or those who follow in their footsteps at the present day. There is a vulgar proverb that he who cuts off his nose disfigures his own face. These persons are men of the same human species as ourselves; their conduct reflects dishonor upon us all. Are we then still so brutal; is the belief that there is a better nature latent in us merely a pleasant fiction?

Perhaps an explanation is possible which will leave us a margin of hope for the future. It appears to me that periods of sudden expansion are the times in which the greatest moral recklessness is exhibited and the ordinary moral scruples are most apt to be set

aside. This thought might be illustrated by the history of colonial expansion, of military expansion, even of artistic expansion—as at the time of the Renaissance; but especially by the history of industrial expansion. New machines are invented, the forces of nature, such as steam and electricity, are drafted into the service of economic ends; new markets are opened, and as a consequence tens of thousands of energetic men see opening before them the opportunity of securing riches. In the previous comparatively stationary state of society their energies had been repressed; small gains, slowly accumulated by much labor and self-denial, had been the rule; the number of very wealthy persons before the industrial revolution set in was relatively small. But now, as a result of the new conditions, the gates of opportunity are thrown wide open, the glittering prize dangles before every eye, and every active forward-pressing person may hope to secure it. He who looks steadfastly and continuously at some burnished object like a metallic doorknob will presently find himself hypnotized. The same is true in the case of brilliant objects of endeavor that stand out before the imagination. And the essence of this hypnotic effect is that it excludes all other objects or ideas from the mental viewpoint, and this it seems to me explains the conduct of the class of employers and mine owners to whom I have referred. It was gold, the unexpected chance of securing Aladdin's treasure, that riveted their attention, that hypnotized them. The cry of the children they did not hear, the degradation of women they did not see, or if they saw it, it made no impression on their impervious minds; the social evils consequent upon their predatory conduct were excluded from their sphere of vision; a kind of monomania took possession of them, they were the victims of a fixed idea. The periods of industrial expansion are peculiarly fruitful of such fixed ideas, and they are therefore the danger points in the development of human society. But what is the hope? The hope is that the results of such a reckless course of action will appear to the eye too plainly to be ignored; that the morally sound elements in the community, if the community be still sound at core, will take alarm; that a powerful reaction will set in, and that as a result certain forms of industrial iniquity which had previously been overlooked or had remained unrecognized will be stigmatized and forbidden; and that the general moral standard with respect to the evils that have appeared will be definitely raised to a higher point

than it had reached before those evils had set in. This is the hope; it is founded on the morally sound elements in the community and on their reaction; I believe that in American communities such elements still abundantly exist.

But it is of child labor in the United States that I am to speak, and here again I shall restrict myself to a few outstanding facts sufficient to establish that we are not fighting windmills, but that the evils which so earensly challenge a remedy are widespread.

At the beginning of 1903 it is estimated that there were in the factories of the South—chiefly cotton factories—about 20,000 children under the age of twelve. Twelve is a very early age at which to begin work; but under the age of twelve, and 20,000, and in the United States of America—who would have credited it? And these children, too, not the children of foreign immigrants, but for the most part the offspring of the purest American stock of this continent; and some of these children, as eye witnesses attest, were at their work even more than twelve hours, as much as thirteen and fourteen hours a day. Where are our instincts of mercy, where is the motherliness of the women of this country, whither is the chivalry of our men that should seek a glory in protecting the defenseless and the weak? Within the last two years child labor laws have been passed which have doubtless reduced the number of children under twelve years of age in the factories; how great the reduction is it is impossible to say. But the South is by no means singular, though it has of late been more conspicuous in its employment of child labor than other sections of the country. And there is no excuse for adopting a pharasaical attitude toward the southern communities and saying: "We are glad that we are not like these." For in the first place, in not a few instances it is northern capital invested in southern mills that shares the responsibility for the conditions named; and then again, while the proportion of child to adult labor in the South is greater than anywhere else in the country, the absolute number of children employed is greater in the industrial centers of the North.

The lack of adequate statistical inquiries makes it impossible to express in figures the extent of the evil of child labor. But wherever investigation is undertaken, wherever the surface is even scratched, we are shocked to find to what an extent the disease is eating its way underneath, even in those States in which legislation on the sub-

ject is almost ideal. The laws are admirable, but the enforcement is defective. Thus glancing over the reports recently transmitted to the National Child Labor Committee by its agents I find that in New Jersey, in one of the woolen mills, 200 children under the legal age are at work. In the glass industry of Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia, the evils of premature work and of night work are combined. A boy, Willie Davis, for instance, thirteen years old, works on alternate nights from 6.30 p. m. to 4.30 a. m., earning ninety cents a day. In one of the glass houses of Wheeling, W. Va., forty boys were seen by the agent, apparently from ten to twelve years of age; one child looked not over nine years old, "but was too busy to be interviewed." In this place 3,000 children of the school age were found to be out of school. In this town there are also many cigar factories that employ children. And speaking of the tobacco industry reminds me of the case of a child worker just reported from Pittsburgh. The boy is employed in a toby factory—"tobies" being a cheap kind of cigar—in rolling tobies. He is twelve years of age; he has already been at work for seven months; the hours of labor are from 6 a. m. to 8 p. m., intermission for lunch fifteen minutes, for supper twenty minutes, in all thirty-five minutes in fourteen hours. He works Saturday nights from seven until midnight, and sometimes until 2 Sunday morning; does not work Saturdays, but works Sundays. The room in which he rolls his "tobies" is described as dark and poorly ventilated; the atmosphere is charged with tobacco dust. The boy seems gentle and uncomplaining, but he coughs; and when he was asked whether he was well, he pointed to his chest and to his back and said: "I have a pain here and there."

And in our own state of New York, which in point of legislation is in advance of all the rest, the infractions of the law that occur are frightful enough, as the petition for the removal of the present Factory Inspector sent to the Governor by the Child Labor Committee of New York plainly proves. In a single one of the canning factories where abuses are particularly flagrant, the foreman himself estimated the number of children at work in violation of the law to be 300. Children as young as ten, nine, and seven were found to be at work side by side with their mothers, from 9 a. m. to 9 p. m. In the Chelsea Jute Mills of Brooklyn, an establishment which acquired an unenviable notoriety in connection with the Annie Ventre case some months ago, there are reported to be at the present time 85

children at work under the legal age. In the sweated trades the evils are the same, or if possible worse. The report further states that the number of violations, not of the child labor laws in particular but of the factory laws in general, are alarmingly on the increase; 33,000 reported in 1901, 50,000 in 1903.

I must again repeat that the number of law-defying employers cannot be estimated with any exactness. Sweeping arraignments, sensational generalizations are unjust in this as in other cases. There are employers, not a few, who on their own initiative endeavor to enhance the safety, the comfort and the well-being of their employees beyond anything that the law requires of them. But the mischief wrought by the lawless minority, affecting as it does so many thousands of human lives, is intolerable; and there is always the danger that in a competitive system the lowering of the standard by the unscrupulous will tend to undermine and to drag down the higher standard which those whose intentions are honorable are attempting to maintain. There is need of efforts gradually to raise the age limit of employment where that limit is too low; and it has been found also that there is need of a kind of National Steering Committee to promote the movement on behalf of child protection—in view of the fact that states hitherto agricultural are more and more entering the column of the industrial states—for the purpose of guiding as far as possible this transition, and enabling the newer industrial communities to profit by the lessons of experience, and preventing in their case the needless repetition of the evils which have marked the initial stages of industrial development in the older countries and commonwealths. Such a committee has now been created. But in addition to good laws, there is need of a vigorous and imperative public sentiment in favor of the enforcement of the laws, for without the pressure of public sentiment the best laws remain dead letters, as the example of New York state demonstrates. But public sentiment cannot be maintained without public interest in the question; and it is to aid in developing such interest with a view to maintaining such a sentiment that I have brought the matter before you in this address.

And now let us briefly consider some of the arguments that are advanced in favor of child labor, and the grounds upon which they are to be rejected. The first argument is, that necessity knows no compunction; that however undesirable it may seem to harness

young children to the yoke of toil, it is impossible to do without them, because if child labor laws are enforced certain important branches of industry will cease to be profitable. For instance, in the glass industry. It is said that this industry cannot be carried on without the aid of young boys, and of the textile industries in the South the same has been averred. This argument is as old as human avarice, and it appears again and again in modern economic history. It is fallacious, for the reason that cheap labor is not really cheap, and that higher paid labor—in this case the labor of adults as compared with that of children—is not really more expensive. The prohibition of the cheap labor of the child is favorable to the invention and use of labor-saving devices; it challenges and promotes a more efficient organization of the business; and it imparts a higher value to the product, because of the greater skill, vigor and interest of the labor that enters into the product. As a matter of fact, at the time when the two principal industries of England—the textile and the coal mining industries—were prohibited from employing children, there was a tremendous outcry, and it was freely predicted that those branches would cease to be profitable, and especially that England would cease to be able to compete in the matter of textiles and coal with foreign countries. But what has been the event? That England is stronger to-day—not in spite of, but because she has forbidden, child labor—in just those two branches of industry than she was at the time when those sinister predictions were uttered. And so if it is said that the glass industry cannot be carried on without child labor there is the fact to be noted that the largest glasshouse in the state of Ohio is carried on without child labor, and does not appear to be conducted at a loss.

A second argument is the attempt to block a humanitarian movement for a seemingly humanitarian reason, the reason being that the labor of these little hands is necessary to relieve the poverty of their families, and that it is cruel to deprive the poor of that increase of their weekly earnings—even if it be only two or three dollars—which little children are able to supply. In answer to this plea it must be said that the actual state of the case is sometimes quite different from what is supposed. For instance, I have in mind the case of a boy who, though fifteen years of age, was sadly overworked, his hours being from 6 a. m. to 10 p. m. The father of this boy earns from six to seven dollars a day. Surely this is not

a case in which the necessity of the parent excuses the overtaxing of the strength of a young boy. In other cases parents are found to lead a parasitic life, reversing the order of nature, the adults living at the expense of the children. Economically it is brought home to us, that the wage earned by children is not really an increase of the family earnings; that where there is competition between children and men the wages of the men are thereby reduced; so that a family in which man, woman, and child are breadwinners, may not earn more—sometimes earns less—than the income gained by the man when the man alone was the breadwinner. And again, in those cases of genuine hardship which undoubtedly occur, especially where women have been left widowed with the care of a family upon their hands, and where the small earnings of children ten and eleven years of age do make an appreciable difference (cases have occurred of loyal little men under the age limit coming to the mills with tears in their eyes and begging to be allowed to labor for their mothers' sake); I say in such cases it is wiser for society to commend indeed the loyalty of these little fellows, but to send them to school, and to follow the example of Ohio, which has spread a law upon its statute books looking to the public relief of destitute families of this kind. It is better for the state to furnish outright relief than to see the standard of living of whole sections of the population lowered by child competition.

These are the two main arguments. There is one other argument, so un-American and so inhuman that I am almost ashamed to quote it, and yet it has been used, and I fear is secretly in the minds of some who would not openly stand for it. A manufacturer standing near the furnace of a glasshouse and pointing to a procession of young Slav boys who were carrying the glass on trays, remarked: "Look at their faces, and you will see that it is idle to take them from the glass-house in order to give them an education; they are what they are, and will always remain what they are." He meant that there are some human beings—and these Slavs of the number—who are mentally irredeemable, so fast asleep intellectually that they cannot be awakened; designed by nature, therefore, to be hewers of wood and drawers of water. This cruel and wicked thing was said of Slavs; it is the same thing which has been said from time immemorial by the slave owners of their *slaves*. First they degrade human beings by denying them the opportunity to

develop their better nature; no schools, no teaching, no freedom, no outlook; and then, as if in mockery, they point to the degraded condition of their victims as a reason why they should never be allowed to escape from it.

These are the arguments advanced for child labor. What I have summarily said may suffice for their refutation; but I shall not content myself merely with the negative attitude of meeting our opponents, and I should like in approaching the close of my address to present the grand positive reason why child servitude should be abolished throughout the length and breadth of this land. The battle is sometimes put on what are called sentimental grounds. Any one who has children of his own cannot help enduring a certain anguish in thinking of such cases as those of the little children treading up and down those stairs of the inferno of the English coal mines with buckets of coal on their backs, or of the little children in the mills returning to their squalid homes at 2.30 in the morning, or of the little boy rolling "tobies" in the dark and ill-ventilated room for fourteen mortal hours, coughing, with a pain "here and there." And when we picture these things and realize what they mean we are apt to cry out in a sort of wild indignation, saying: "These things must stop; we will not permit them to go on." In other words, we think of the individual children; and as we are men and women capable of sympathetic feeling, our hearts bleed for them.

But in addition we must never forget that beyond the individual interest there is a vast social interest at stake, the interest of American civilization, of human civilization, of all those generations that are to succeed us. The reason why child labor must be abolished, apart from the sufferings of individuals, is one which biology and ethics combine to enforce upon us. The higher the type of living being the finer the organism, the longer the period of time required for its maturing. The young of birds and of the lower animals are full grown after a few days or a few weeks. They acquire with incredible rapidity the use of inherited instincts, and after the shortest infancy are ready to take up the struggle for existence after the fashion of their species. The human being requires a period of preparation extending over years before he is ready to take up the struggle for existence after the human fashion. First infancy, then childhood, then early youth; and during all that period he must

remain dependent on the protection and the nurture of adult kinsfolk. If that period is curtailed the end of Nature in this highest type of living being—man—is thwarted. It is for this reason that premature toil is such a curse. The child must develop physically, and to do so it must play; the child must develop mentally, and to do so it must be sent to school; the child must develop morally, and to do so it must be kept within the guarded precincts of the home.

The physical effects of precocious childhood are arrest of growth, puny, stunted stature, anæmia, thin, emaciated limbs, sunken cheeks and hollow eyes; and diseases of all kinds—of the lungs, of the joints, of the spine—for arrest of development does not mean mere arrest, but means malformation.

The mental effects of precocity labor are likewise arrest of mental development; and this, too, means not only a stopping short but a development in the wrong direction. The brilliant but short-lived intelligence of many newsboys, their high-strung excitability, their sinister anticipation of world knowledge, followed often by torpor and mental exhaustion later on are an instance in point. We laugh at and applaud their sallies of wit, their quick repartee, their seeming ability to play the game of life on a par with adults; we do not look beyond the moment, nor count the cost they pay.

And the moral effects, as is to be expected, are of the same sort: loosening of family ties, roving the streets, familiarity with vice and the haunts of vice, a startling independence before the moral nature is fit to maintain independence, a process of selection so trying that while sometimes it leads those subjected to it to distinguished achievement, more often it leads to ruin.

The finer the type the longer the period needed for the maturing of it. In the case of youths dedicated to the professions, the period of preparation at present extends far into the twenties. In the case of all who are to be component members of this American nation, to carry on its great traditions and help in solving its tremendous problems, the period of preparation should not be cut short below the sixteenth year. This is the standard toward which we are working, toward which we hope to approximate—more rapidly in the older communities, more patiently and with a due regard to all the interests involved in the less advanced communities. But we look forward to the day when the standard shall be adopted in all the

American Commonwealths, and the total abolition of child labor in every form shall be the honorable achievement of the entire American people.

The emancipation of childhood from economic servitude is a social reform of the first magnitude. It is also one upon which we can all unite. There are so many proposed reforms upon which it is impossible to secure agreement, different minds, though alike honest, inevitably differing with regard to them. But here is a reform upon which we can agree, which must appeal to every right thinking person, and which is urgent. And one particular advantage of it I should like to point out, namely, that it is calculated to be the best induction into the right spirit of social reform, that it will attune the community in which it is achieved to a favorable reception of sane and sound social reforms generally. Because if once it comes to be an understood thing that a certain sacredness "doth hedge around" a child, that a child is industrially taboo, that to violate its rights is to touch profanely a holy thing, that it has a soul which must not be blighted for the prospect of mere gain; if this be once generally conceded with regard to the child the same essential reasoning will be found to apply also to the adult workers; they, too, will not be looked upon as mere commodities, as mere instruments for the accumulation of riches; to them also a certain sacredness will be seen to attach, and certain human rights to belong, which may not be infringed. I have great hopes for the adjustment of our labor difficulties on a higher plane, if once we can gain the initial victory of inculcating regard for the higher human nature that is present potentially in the child.

And there is one additional word which, if I may so far encroach upon your patience, I should like to say: It is not enough to shut the children out of the factory, we must also bring them into the school, and compel parents, if necessary, to send them to school; the movement for compulsory education everywhere goes hand in hand, and must go hand in hand, with the child labor movement.

The child labor movement has for its object to fence off an open space within which the educational institutions of the country may do their perfect work. The school has for its object to win from the human beings confided to it the human qualities latent in them, imagination, taste, skill, appreciation, vigorous reasoning, will power, character; to fulfill the ends of Nature in the finest organism,

the highest type of living being which she has yet produced. A more convincing appeal than comes to us from these two movements jointly, the child labor and the educational movements, in my judgment, cannot be conceived of. And without the former the latter cannot succeed.